

# In the Midst of Genocide in Gaza – The Legacy of Rachel Corrie Lives On

By Benay Blend – March, 2024

*During her time in Gaza, Corrie stayed with a family in Rafah. In her letters home, she referred to the difference between there and here as a “virtual portal into luxury”.*



Portrait by Robert Shetterly, Americans Who Tell the Truth

In 1990-91, Corrie wrote in her journal: “I guess people are happier not caring...Gee, maybe I should try not caring sometime. Then I’d be unstoppable, untouchable. What a blast! Or would it be?” (*Let Me Stand Alone: The Journals of Rachel Corrie*, 2008, pp. 12, 13).

On March 16, 2003, a 60-tonne D9 bulldozer built by Caterpillar Inc. ran over her while she was attempting to protect a home from demolition in Rafah. Murdered much too young, Corrie believed that a live well-lived involved living for a cause.

During her time in Gaza, Corrie stayed with a family in Rafah. In her letters home, she referred to the difference between there and here as a “virtual portal into luxury,” an awareness that she would always see the life her host family lived through a Western lens.

Written shortly before her death, Corrie experienced many things that shocked her. Yet she was not what activist/journalist Ramzy Baroud would term a “victim intellectual,” an individual who, within the space allowed by pro-Palestinian groups, spoke only of the Palestinian’s victimhood, thereby conveying narratives that lack appropriate historical context.

“The Palestinian struggle cannot be reduced to a conversation about poverty or the horrors of war,” Baroud writes, “but must be expanded to include the wider political contexts that led to the current tragedies in the first place.”

When Corrie describes the checkpoints that Palestinians must pass through on their way to work or university, when she calls attention to demolished homes, she is putting information into an historical, geopolitical context, one that includes the victimizer, too.

She also understood what Baroud tweeted many years after her death: “For Palestinians, our joy and our grief always go hand in hand. Life has forced us to learn to extract fleeting moments of happiness from the deepest of wounds. This is where our power comes from, and this is how our culture survives the scourge of colonialism.”

After admitting in a letter home that she was in the “midst of genocide,” Corrie said that she would be forever changed after witnessing a “degree of evil” that she had previously thought impossible.

Nevertheless, she believed that Palestinians set a good example for “how to be in it for the long haul.” Through their “laughter, generosity, [and] family-time,” they maintain their humanity in the most challenging of times. “I think the word is dignity,” concluded Corrie, an ability to “remain human” while facing death.

What Corrie witnessed in 2003—the joy and pain that she saw in Gaza—remains until this day as Gazans are experiencing Ramadan during a time when Israelis are escalating their siege. Despite the sorrow of 31,184 dead as of today, 72,889 wounded, and 7000 missing under rubble, Mahmoud Ajjar writes from Gaza that shopkeepers are retrieving unsold items from Ramadan last year and putting the decorations and lanterns on display to create a semblance of celebration for the children.

This year there are no dates, dried figs or spices, as families barely have enough to eat, but “the fighting spirit of the Palestinians remains undefeated,” at least as far as maintaining the humanity that Corrie much earlier observed.

Corrie might also understand the decision of musician Fares Anbar to remain in Gaza despite the hardships and the pain. “By God, what a strong people we are,” Anbar said. “We have been given the strength and patience to bear a burden that humanity is incapable of bearing. I thank God for the blessing that I am a Gazan.”

Because Corrie saw that the beauty of Palestine stands out amidst its grief, she most certainly would have appreciated Anbar’s assessment of Gazans under siege. “The people of Gaza love life more than the occupation fears death,” he declared, and vowed that, if not martyred, he would dedicate his music to every citizen of Gaza until his death.

Until 2023, Gazans honored Rachel Corrie with a biennial football tournament organized in her name. Sponsored by the Rachel Corrie Foundation, the event honors Rachel’s solidarity with Palestinians as well as the kindness that she received from families who took her in.

According to Adnan Abulsoud, the organizer of the tournament for several years, “teams are named after Palestinian towns occupied in 1948 to remind people of the right of return,” thereby reminding people of the Nakba during which these villages were ethnically cleansed.

Because Corrie travelled with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), she adhered to the group’s commitment to nonviolence in her actions and beliefs. But

she understood that she could not impose that stance onto other people, in particular the oppressed, and she was beginning to have doubts about it, too.

In a letter dated February 27, 2003, Corrie responded to her mother’s contention that “Palestinian violence was not helping the situation.” After recounting economic hardships imposed by Israel through the occupation, she asked her mother: “What is left?”

“I really think, in a similar situation, most people would defend themselves as best they could,” concluded Corrie, thereby placing herself side-by-side with the oppressed. Always striving for accuracy in her assessment of life in Rafah, she told her mother that Gaza was undergoing genocide because all means of survival had been cut off.

In her brief time in Gaza, Rachel Corrie epitomized what it means to be in solidarity with another group of people. In his exploration of the term, Israeli anti-Zionist historian Ilan Pappé explains that there is always a “tension between effort and tangible results” (“The International Struggle on Behalf of Palestine,” *Our Vision for Liberation: Engaged Palestinian Leaders Speak Out*, edited by Ramzy Baroud, 2022, pp. 411-412).

Though she would not have known him, Corrie followed Pappé’s solution (p.412) by focusing less on her own achievements but instead asking herself if she had done enough. “I still really want to dance around to Pat Benatar and have boyfriends and make comics for my coworkers,” she conceded, “but I also want this to stop.” During her brief time in Gaza, Corrie did everything she could to fulfill the hope that she communicated in her letters.

“Learning about the true nature of solidarity is something you cannot learn theoretically or study in a university,” Pappé continued. “You need to experience it through your own activism” (p. 412). Corrie knew that too.

“No amount of reading, attendance at conferences, documentary viewing and word of mouth could have prepared me for the reality of the situation here,” Corrie wrote home to her parents. She had to see it for herself. That she did so will continue to educate and inspire activists for many years to come.

=====

**Letters to her family from 23-year-old U.S. peace activist Rachel Corrie, who was killed in 2003 while trying to prevent the Israeli army from destroying homes in the Gaza Strip.**

**February 7, 2003**

Hi friends and family, and others,

I have been in Palestine for two weeks and one hour now, and I still have very few words to describe what I see. It is most difficult for me to think about what's going on here when I sit down to write back to the United States. Something about the virtual portal into luxury. I don't know if many of the children here have ever existed without tank-shell holes in their walls and the towers of an occupying army surveying them constantly from the near horizons.

I think, although I'm not entirely sure, that even the smallest of these children understand that life is not like this everywhere. An 8-year-old was shot and killed by an Israeli tank two days before I got here, and many of the children murmur his name to me — Ali — or point at the posters of him on the walls. The children also love to get me to practice my limited Arabic by asking me, "Kaif Sharon?" "Kaif Bush?" and they laugh when I say, "Bush Majnoon," "Sharon Majnoon" back in my limited Arabic. (How is Sharon? How is Bush? Bush is crazy. Sharon is crazy.)

Of course, this isn't quite what I believe, and some of the adults who have the English correct me: "Bush mish Majnoon" . . . Bush is a businessman. Today I tried to learn to say, "Bush is a tool," but I don't think it translated quite right. But anyway, there are 8-year-olds here much more aware of the workings of the global power structure than I was just a few years ago.

***Nevertheless, no amount of reading, attendance at conferences, documentary viewing and word of mouth could have prepared me for the reality of the situation here. You just can't imagine it unless you see it — and even then you are always well aware that your experience of it is not at all the reality: what with the difficulties the Israeli army would face if they shot an unarmed U.S. citizen, and with the fact that I have money to buy water when the army destroys wells, and the fact, of course, that I have the option of leaving.***

***[Matthias Chang's comments: The reason, why I have called so many Malaysians hypocrites is that they talk BS and seek publicity for themselves and exploits the Palestinians for self-seeking agendas. When asked to go to Palestine, specifically to Gaza, their stupid retort is that "We cannot go, because we have not been there and have no experience." Yet, Rachel Corrie went because she need to experience for herself the cruelty and barbarism suffered by the Palestinians. The cowardice of the Malaysians is so damning and exposed by the heroism of Rachel Corrie ... she went to Palestine BECAUSE she had no experience and needed to have the experience to tell the truth and did so with courage. Contrast the cowardice of the BS by Malahysian hypocrites]***

Nobody in my family has been shot, driving in their car, by a rocket launcher from a tower at the end of a major street in my hometown. I have a home. I am allowed to go see the ocean. When I leave for school or work I can be relatively certain that there will not be a heavily armed soldier waiting halfway between Mud Bay and downtown Olympia at a checkpoint with the power to decide whether I can go about my business, and whether I can get home again when I'm done.

As an afterthought to all this rambling, I am in Rafah: a city of about 140,000 people, approximately 60 per cent of whom are refugees — many of whom are twice or three times refugees. Today, as I walked on top of the rubble where homes once stood, Egyptian soldiers called to me from the other side of the border, “Go! Go!” because a tank was coming. And then waving and “What’s your name?” Something disturbing about this friendly curiosity. It reminded me of how much, to some degree, we are all kids curious about other kids. Egyptian kids shouting at strange women wandering into the path of tanks. Palestinian kids shot from the tanks when they peek out from behind walls to see what’s going on. International kids standing in front of tanks with banners. Israeli kids in the tanks anonymously — occasionally shouting and also occasionally waving — many forced to be here, many just aggressive — shooting into the houses as we wander away.

I’ve been having trouble accessing news about the outside world here, but I hear an escalation of war on Iraq is inevitable. There is a great deal of concern here about the “reoccupation of Gaza.” Gaza is reoccupied every day to various extents but I think the fear is that the tanks will enter all the streets and remain here instead of entering some of the streets and then withdrawing after some hours or days to observe and shoot from the edges of the communities. If people aren’t already thinking about the consequences of this war for the people of the entire region, then I hope you will start.

My love to everyone. My love to my mom. My love to smooch. My love to fg and barnhair and sesamees and Lincoln School. My love to Olympia.

Rachel

**This Feb. 7 letter was read aloud in 2005 by Rachel’s mother, Cindy Corrie.**

=====

**February 20, 2003**

Mama,

Now the Israeli army has actually dug up the road to Gaza, and both of the major checkpoints are closed. This means that Palestinians who want to go and register for their next quarter at university can’t. People can’t get to their jobs and those who are trapped on the other side can’t get home; and internationals, who have a meeting tomorrow in the West Bank, won’t make it. We could probably make it through if we made serious use of our international white person privilege, but that would also mean some risk of arrest and deportation, even though none of us has done anything illegal.

The Gaza Strip is divided in thirds now. There is some talk about the “reoccupation of Gaza,” but I seriously doubt this will happen, because I think it would be a geopolitically stupid move for Israel right now. **I think the more**

**likely thing is an increase in smaller below-the-international-outcry-radar incursions and possibly the oft-hinted “population transfer.”**

I am staying put in Rafah for now, no plans to head north. I still feel like I'm relatively safe and think that my most likely risk in case of a larger-scale incursion is arrest. **A move to reoccupy Gaza would generate a much larger outcry than Sharon's assassination-during-peace-negotiations/land grab strategy, which is working very well now to create settlements all over, slowly but surely eliminating any meaningful possibility for Palestinian self-determination.** Know that I have a lot of very nice Palestinians looking after me. I have a small flu bug, and got some very nice lemony drinks to cure me. Also, the woman who keeps the key for the well where we still sleep keeps asking me about you. **She doesn't speak a bit of English, but she asks about my mom pretty frequently — wants to make sure I'm calling you.**

Love to you and Dad and Sarah and Chris and everybody.

Rachel

**February 27, 2003**

(To her mother)

**Love you. Really miss you. I have bad nightmares about tanks and bulldozers outside our house and you and me inside. Sometimes the adrenaline acts as an anesthetic for weeks and then in the evening or at night it just hits me again — a little bit of the reality of the situation.**

I am really scared for the people here. Yesterday, I watched a father lead his two tiny children, holding his hands, out into the sight of tanks and a sniper tower and bulldozers and Jeeps because he thought his house was going to be exploded. Jenny and I stayed in the house with several women and two small babies. It was our mistake in translation that caused him to think it was his house that was being exploded. In fact, the Israeli army was in the process of detonating an explosive in the ground nearby — one that appears to have been planted by Palestinian resistance.

**This is in the area where Sunday about 150 men were rounded up and contained outside the settlement with gunfire over their heads and around them, while tanks and bulldozers destroyed 25 greenhouses — the livelihoods for 300 people.** The explosive was right in front of the greenhouses — right in the point of entry for tanks that might come back again.

I was terrified to think that this man felt it was less of a risk to walk out in view of the tanks with his kids than to stay in his house. **I was really scared that they were all going to be shot and I tried to stand between them and the tank.** This happens every day, but just this father walking out with his two little kids just looking very sad, just happened to get my attention more at this particular moment, probably because I felt it was our translation problems that made him leave.

**I thought a lot about what you said on the phone about Palestinian violence not helping the situation. Sixty thousand workers from Rafah worked in Israel two years ago. Now only 600 can go to Israel for jobs. Of these 600, many have moved, because the three checkpoints between here and Ashkelon (the closest city in Israel) make what used to be a 40-minute drive, now a 12-hour or impassible journey.**

In addition, what Rafah identified in 1999 as sources of economic growth are all completely destroyed — the Gaza international airport (runways demolished, totally closed); the border for trade with Egypt (now with a giant Israeli sniper tower in the middle of the crossing); access to the ocean (completely cut off in the last two years by a checkpoint and the Gush Katif settlement). The count of homes destroyed in Rafah since the beginning of this intifada is up around 600, by and large people with no connection to the resistance but who happen to live along the border. **I think it is maybe official now that Rafah is the poorest place in the world.** There used to be a middle class here — recently. We also get reports that in the past, Gazan flower shipments to Europe were delayed for two weeks at the Erez crossing for security inspections. You can imagine the value of two-week-old cut flowers in the European market, so that market dried up. **And then the bulldozers come and take out people's vegetable farms and gardens. What is left for people? Tell me if you can think of anything. I can't.**

**If any of us had our lives and welfare completely strangled, lived with children in a shrinking place where we knew, because of previous experience, that soldiers and tanks and bulldozers could come for us at any moment and destroy all the greenhouses that we had been cultivating for however long, and did this while some of us were beaten and held captive with 149 other people for several hours — do you think we might try to use somewhat violent means to protect whatever fragments remained?**

think about this especially when I see orchards and greenhouses and fruit trees destroyed — just years of care and cultivation. **I think about you and how long it takes to make things grow and what a labour of love it is. I really think, in a similar situation, most people would defend themselves as best they could. I think Uncle Craig would. I think probably Grandma would. I think I would.**

You asked me about non-violent resistance.

When that explosive detonated yesterday it broke all the windows in the family's house. I was in the process of being served tea and playing with the two small babies. I'm having a hard time right now. **Just feel sick to my stomach a lot from being doted on all the time, very sweetly, by people who are facing doom.** I know that from the United States, it all sounds like hyperbole.

**Honestly, a lot of the time the sheer kindness of the people here, coupled with the overwhelming evidence of the willful destruction of their lives, makes it seem unreal to me. I really can't believe that something like this**

can happen in the world without a bigger outcry about it. It really hurts me, again, like it has hurt me in the past, to witness how awful we can allow the world to be.

I felt after talking to you that maybe you didn't completely believe me. I think it's actually good if you don't, because I do believe pretty much above all else in the importance of independent critical thinking. **And I also realize that with you I'm much less careful than usual about trying to source every assertion that I make. A lot of the reason for that is I know that you actually do go and do your own research. But it makes me worry about the job I'm doing.** All of the situations that I tried to enumerate above — and a lot of other things — constitutes a somewhat gradual — often hidden, but nevertheless massive — removal and destruction of the ability of a particular group of people to survive. This is what I am seeing here.

The assassinations, rocket attacks and shooting of children are atrocities — but in focusing on them I'm terrified of missing their context. The vast majority of people here — even if they had the economic means to escape, even if they actually wanted to give up resisting on their land and just leave (which appears to be maybe the less nefarious of Sharon's possible goals), **can't leave.**

**Because they can't even get into Israel to apply for visas, and because their destination countries won't let them in (both our country and Arab countries). So I think when all means of survival is cut off in a pen (Gaza) which people can't get out of, I think that qualifies as genocide. Even if they could get out, I think it would still qualify as genocide. Maybe you could look up the definition of genocide according to international law.** I don't remember it right now. I'm going to get better at illustrating this, hopefully. I don't like to use those charged words. I think you know this about me. I really value words. **I really try to illustrate and let people draw their own conclusions.**

Anyway, I'm rambling. **Just want to write to my Mom and tell her that I'm witnessing this chronic, insidious genocide and I'm really scared, and questioning my fundamental belief in the goodness of human nature. This has to stop. I think it is a good idea for us all to drop everything and devote our lives to making this stop.**

**I don't think it's an extremist thing to do anymore. I still really want to dance around to Pat Benatar and have boyfriends and make comics for my co-workers. But I also want this to stop. Disbelief and horror is what I feel. Disappointment. I am disappointed that this is the base reality of our world and that we, in fact, participate in it. This is not at all what I asked for when I came into this world.** This is not at all what the people here asked for when they came into this world. This is not the world you and Dad wanted me to come into when you decided to have me. This is not what I meant when I looked at Capital Lake and said: "This is the wide world and I'm coming to it." **I did not mean that I was coming into a world where I could live a comfortable life and possibly, with no effort at all, exist in complete**



**unawareness of my participation in genocide. More big explosions somewhere in the distance outside.**

When I come back from Palestine, I probably will have nightmares and constantly feel guilty for not being here, but I can channel that into more work. **Coming here is one of the better things I've ever done. So when I sound crazy, or if the Israeli military should break with their racist tendency not to injure white people, please pin the reason squarely on the fact that I am in the midst of a genocide which I am also indirectly supporting, and for which my government is largely responsible.**

I love you and Dad. Sorry for the diatribe. OK, some strange men next to me just gave me some peas, so I need to eat and thank them.

Rachel

### **February 28, 2003**

(To her mother)

Thanks, Mom, for your response to my email. It really helps me to get word from you, and from other people who care about me.

After I wrote to you I went incommunicado from the affinity group for about 10 hours which I spent with a family on the front line in Hi Salam — who fixed me dinner — and have cable TV. **The two front rooms of their house are unusable because gunshots have been fired through the walls, so the whole family — three kids and two parents — sleep in the parents' bedroom. I sleep on the floor next to the youngest daughter, Iman, and we all shared blankets.** I helped the son with his English homework a little, and we all watched *Pet Semetary*, which is a horrifying movie. I think they all thought it was pretty funny how much trouble I had watching it. Friday is the holiday, and when I woke up they were watching *Gummy Bears* dubbed into Arabic. So I ate breakfast with them and sat there for a while and just enjoyed being in this big puddle of blankets with this family watching what for me seemed like Saturday morning cartoons. Then I walked some way to B'razil, which is where Nidal and Mansur and Grandmother and Rafat and all the rest of the big family that has really wholeheartedly adopted me live. (The other day, by the way, Grandmother gave me a pantomimed lecture in Arabic that involved a lot of blowing and pointing to her black shawl. I got Nidal to tell her that my mother would appreciate knowing that someone here was giving me a lecture about smoking turning my lungs black.) I met their sister-in-law, who is visiting from Nusserat camp, and played with her small baby.

Nidal's English gets better every day. He's the one who calls me, "My sister." He started teaching Grandmother how to say, "Hello. How are you?" In English. You can always hear the tanks and bulldozers passing by, but all of these people are genuinely cheerful with each other, and with me. When I am with

Palestinian friends I tend to be somewhat less horrified than when I am trying to act in a role of human rights observer, documenter, or direct-action resister. **They are a good example of how to be in it for the long haul. I know that the situation gets to them — and may ultimately get them — on all kinds of levels, but I am nevertheless amazed at their strength in being able to defend such a large degree of their humanity — laughter, generosity, family-time — against the incredible horror occurring in their lives and against the constant presence of death.** I felt much better after this morning.

**I spent a lot of time writing about the disappointment of discovering, somewhat first-hand, the degree of evil of which we are still capable. I should at least mention that I am also discovering a degree of strength and of basic ability for humans to remain human in the direst of circumstances — which I also haven't seen before. I think the word is dignity. I wish you could meet these people. Maybe, hopefully, someday you will.**

Rachel

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. Rachel Corrie's letters were sent almost exactly 20 years ago. The young children she met are today in their 20s, if they are alive. What are some of the key memories you think these young people might have, based on what is included in Corrie's letters?
2. What questions come up for you in Rachel Corrie's letters? About people in Gaza, about Corrie?
3. Think about the descriptions in Rachel Corrie's letters. What conditions make life so difficult for Palestinians?
4. In one letter, Rachel Corrie says, "I am really scared for the people here." Why is she scared for people?
5. Nowhere in Rachel Corrie's letters does she use the word "courage." Yet at one point in her letters, she describes that "I tried to stand between them [Palestinians] and the tank." What are the experiences in Corrie's life that might lead to this kind of courageous response?
6. Go through Rachel Corrie's letters and underline phrases that you find moving, startling, poignant, poetic. Write a "found poem" from language you find in her letters.
7. Rachel Corrie's mother says that Palestinian violent resistance is making things worse. Rachel asks her mom: "What is left for people? Tell me if you can think of anything. I can't . . ." What do you think about Rachel's statement? What might her mother say?
8. Rachel Corrie writes: "I really can't believe that something like this can happen in the world without a bigger outcry about it. It really hurts me, again, like it has hurt me in the past, to witness how awful we can allow the world to be." Why is it that "we" can allow the world to be so awful?
9. Rachel Corrie writes: "So I think when all means of survival is cut off in a pen (Gaza) which people can't get out of, I think that qualifies as

genocide.” What do you think of this statement of Corrie’s? What does this mean people in Gaza should do? What does it lead Corrie to want to do?

10. What do you think led Rachel Corrie to travel to Gaza to live with the people there in such difficult situations? Try to imagine one experience that Corrie may have had in her hometown of Olympia, Washington, that may have led her to make the decision to travel to Gaza to stand with people there.
11. Based just on what you read in Rachel Corrie’s letters, what thoughts do you have about the Palestinians in Gaza whom she spent time with?
12. Rachel Corrie says that Gazans have dignity. “Dignity.” What does she mean by that? What leads her to say that? What does the word dignity mean to you?